

Sexting Really Can Make Your Relationship Hotter—Here's the Right Way to Do It



Most adults have sent sexy texts or racy photos to a partner, according to a new survey, and experts say it can help you tap into your desires and steam things up IRL—if you follow these sexting ground rules.

Danielle Friedman September 05, 2017

For most of us, our phones have become extensions of ourselves. We use them to connect with the people we care about, to eat (thanks, Seamless!), and to track our every footstep.

So it makes sense, as comedian Aziz Ansari writes in his bestselling book *Modern Romance*, that because our phones are “integral to even the most mundane of tasks, of course, they are also a big part of where we live our romantic lives.”

What does this look like in practice? For people who are in relationships, it can look like texting your partner to ask how their presentation at work went.

In a new survey from the Clue period tracking app and the Kinsey Institute, 67 percent of respondents (all of whom were over the age of 18) said they had sexted. For comparison, in a Kinsey Institute survey conducted in 2012, only 21 percent said the same.

“The increasing comfort and increasing normalcy of having tech intertwined with our lives [has likely contributed] to this rise in sexting,” Amanda Gesselman, PhD, a research scientist at the Kinsey Institute, explains to *Health* in an email. “It doesn’t seem quite as risky or new and scary as it might have years ago.”

Despite this shift, sexting still gets a bad rap, thanks to notorious sexters like Anthony Weiner and horror stories of sexts gone viral. “I think a misconception about sexting is that it’s either a fun, sexy thing to do or an incredibly dangerous thing to do, with no shades of gray in between,” says Gesselman. “Our research and that of other scientists shows that it’s much more nuanced . . . depending on the people involved and their situation.”

So far, research into sexting hasn’t shown any clear evidence that it can flat-out improve relationship satisfaction. (Perhaps this is why Nicole Kidman and Keith Urban only exchange precisely one sext a year?) But sex therapists say anecdotally that when couples in healthy relationships follow a few rules and approach sexting as a tool for enhancing their connection, it can actually be valuable.

“There’s a whole spectrum of ways to use sexting—and get benefits out of it,” Kat Van Kirk, PhD, a California- and Hawaii-based marriage and sex therapist, tells *Health*. “I’ve seen people open themselves up more sexually *overall* because they started sexting with their partner.”

Danielle Harel, PhD, a San Francisco-based sex therapist, agrees. “Sex doesn’t happen like a switch that you turn on and off,” she explains to *Health*. Many long-term couples struggle to “keep themselves simmered in a sexual buzz,” and sexting can light a fire. Here's how to get started steaming things up on screen—and then IRL.

Establish ground rules

Before you hit send on that naked selfie or text an eggplant emoji to your partner, establish consent by having a conversation during which you both enthusiastically agree you’re into it. As with everything sexual, consent is key, and it's good to decide on some ground rules you're comfortable with.

“If your partner only wants sexy text messages then send them those,” Joe Currin, a doctoral candidate in psychology at Oklahoma State University who’s spent the past few years studying sexting, tells *Health* in an email. “If a partner is not comfortable sending nude self images, don't pressure them to send them.” Then, negotiate rules of access. “Is it okay to save messages? Is it okay to save photos/videos? Is it not okay? Set those guidelines and stick to them,” he says.

Start sloooow

For many couples, the key to making sexting feel natural is to start with messages that are subtle. The first few sexts you exchange don’t even need to be sexy, says Harel, who is also the co-author with Celeste Hirschman of *Making Love Real: The Intelligent Couple's Guide to Lasting Intimacy and Passion*. “Start by sending your partner words of appreciation,” the pair advises. Then, depending on how it’s going, escalate from there.

Enjoy the tease

Sexting can be a potent form of foreplay—think of it as a way to gradually build sexual tension. “You can have *long* foreplay throughout the day,” says Harel. “For example, someone says, ‘I’m thinking about you.’ And then you start to be more explicit: ‘Remember last night when you kissed me on my neck? I really liked that.’ So you build it the way you would build a sexy conversation. You don’t jump straight to the action. Many times you don’t even get to the action. You just get home and get it on.”

Push boundaries

It depends on your comfort level of course, but consider using sexting as a way to suggest something that you haven't experienced yet would love to try. Or use it as a tactic to tap into what really turns you on. “With women, in particular, it helps you find what *you* find arousing,” says Van Kirk. “It helps you get to know this whole other aspect of yourself. And then you can share it with a partner. You’re actually kind of educating them on what you find hot.”

Be playful

Sexting with your partner should be fun and relaxed, not something rigid and formal. “People put a lot of pressure on themselves [with sex], and it becomes this really serious thing,” says Van Kirk. “I’ve found that people who are able to roll with things and laugh at themselves and their partner and their situation really fare much better with sex *and* relationships.”

Sexting can be as playful as you want it to be. “Be creative; there are tons of emojis and GIFs that can be used as innuendos,” says Currin. Invent your own secret sexting language. “It really is just another way to flirt.”

If it's not working for you, say so

In the beginning, it might take a while to get into a good sexting rhythm—it might even feel uncomfortable at first. “And that’s okay,” says Van Kirk. “A little discomfort is actually good because it means you’re doing something new.”

But if you or your partner aren’t enjoying the exchanges, agree to give it a rest. “Test the waters a little bit,” Harel and Hirschman advise. “Don’t be pushy. It’s important to say to your partner, ‘I really want you to tell me if something doesn’t work for you—I don’t want you to suck it up.’”

Sexting, at its best, “is about paying attention,” they say. “It’s a conversation.” Even when you're conversing in erotic produce.